

**ECONOMY IN THE SERVICE OF LIFE
JUNE 15-19, 2002, in Soesterberg (The Netherlands)**

**RESPONSE FROM THE SOESTERBERG CONSULTATION TO THE LETTER TO
THE CHURCHES IN THE NORTH FROM THE BANGKOK SYMPOSIUM, THE
MESSAGE FROM THE FIJI CONSULTATION AND A CALL BY THE CHURCHES
FROM ARGENTINA**

From 15-19 June 2002, more than 80 representatives from Western European churches, as well as guests from churches in Central and Eastern Europe, North America, Africa and Asia, from the Vatican and from ecumenical organisations gathered in Soesterberg (The Netherlands) for a consultation with the guiding theme: Economy in the Service of Life. This consultation was graciously hosted by the National Council of Churches in The Netherlands. It took place under the joint auspices of the World Council of Churches, the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, the Lutheran World Federation, the Conference of European Churches and the European Area Committee of WARC.

The Letters to the Churches in the North from the Bangkok consultation and messages from the other consultations in the joint ecumenical process that were held in Budapest and Fiji informed the discussion taking place at our consultation. Once more, we listened to the cries emanating from the financial crises in Asia, Russia, and more recently Argentina. Lives and hopes have been shattered; people lost their lives; everyday survival has become a struggle for many. We heard that impoverishment is growing on a daily basis; the gap in income distribution is widening; the numbers of migrants increase; trafficking in children and their economic exploitation is rife. There is an explosion of social violence; family life is disrupted and more and more women bear the brunt of poverty and violence. Growing inequality leads at the same time to increasing numbers of migrants who are withheld the same rights as other citizens and find themselves and their families in very difficult circumstances, often confronted with new expressions of racism. We also shared our deep concerns about the militarisation of global politics and again increasing military spending. The new focus on security undermines the sense of shared vulnerability of human communities and of solidarity with those who lose out in the process of economic globalisation.

The participants in a *Symposium on the Consequences of Economic Globalisation* held in Bangkok in November 1999, have stated in their message to the churches in the North that "economic injustice is a violation of the basic tenets of our common faith." They encourage us as Christians in the Northern hemisphere to develop a culture of caring and sharing, bearing in mind the essential unity of the one body of Christ. In addition, we are encouraged by our brothers and sisters in Argentina "not to resign [ourselves] to the present situation, but to listen with renewed attention to God's Word, and to accompany all those who suffer and to practice solidarity with those in the greatest need"¹. We are called upon to "run the risk of being witnesses"² The message of the Fiji consultation shares with us the motivating image of the Island of Hope and refers to alternatives emerging from the peoples and their cultures in the different regions of the world.

As a response to their cries, their encouragement and their calls, we emphasise the following in affirmation of the basic human values stated by the North/South Working Group of the Church and

¹ *Message to the churches* by CLAI, Faith, Economy and Society Program Advisory Group, January 21, 2002.

² Letter by Argentinian churches *To our sister Churches, agencies and Christian institutions in the Northern Hemisphere*, December 20, 2001.

Society Commission of the Conference of European Churches³:

Jesus Christ says: “The thief comes only to steal, and kill and destroy. I have come that they may have life, and have it abundantly.” (John 10:10)

We affirm

- life in its fullness for all: God’s household, the divine economy, comprises the whole earth and all who dwell on it.

We acknowledge that our being church together has been and is being deeply hurt by

- involvement of Christians in colonial conquests and support for colonial powers in the past;
- the fact that many of our societies are still contributing to unequal and unjust North-South relations today, while Christians in many of our churches do not agree on the analysis of the situation and the actions required from us;

3 Cf. chapter 5 of the document of the North/South Working Group of the Church and Society Commission of the Conference of European Churches: “European social market economy – an alternative model for globalisation?”

- our failure to listen and to respond sufficiently to the pain of the excluded, the exploited, the displaced and the hopeless in the South and among us;
- the fact that we do not resist strongly enough to the idolatrous and exclusive character of the neo-liberal doctrine and practice of the ‘free market economy’, leading to intolerable inequality and the destruction of the environment which you experience in your countries;
- avoiding risking insecurity for the sake of the poor and the disempowered as an expression of our shared vulnerability,
- opting for compromise when we should challenge those with political and economic power to build an economy in the service of life and protect social, cultural and economic rights.

Overcoming neo-liberal globalisation

We do not subscribe to the widespread assumption that “there is no alternative“ to economic globalisation as it is developing now guided by the neo-liberal economic doctrine, nor do we believe that economic globalisation is a leaderless process - there are people in charge. As Christians, we must and will approach and challenge them, even more so because many of them are members of our churches.

Neo-liberal economic globalisation can and does divide and exclude. This is true in the South as well as in our societies. It can and does violate the gospel of life by causing agony for many. As Christians, we constitute the one body of Christ. If one part of the body suffers, all the others suffer as well. Economic globalisation threatens to tear the fellowship, the *koinonia* of the one body of Christ apart. Our biblical tradition reminds us that we are called to follow Jesus Christ in all spheres of life and that we have to choose between God or mammon, life or death (Mt 6:24, Dtn 30:11ff).

Membership of our churches in Western Europe is declining and the prevailing values in society are less and less influenced by Christian values. We are challenged in many ways by this reality. We need to hear and to respond in new ways to the call of the Gospel to speak with a prophetic voice to the societies in which we are living. In response to God’s promise of life, and in response to the voices from the churches in the South, members of the same body of Christ, we will engage in concrete actions of solidarity and sharing. We will remind members of our churches to witness to God’s justice by preaching, liturgy and education. We will remind our members working in those institutions in which political and economic decisions are made that they must work towards life sustaining policies for peoples and nations. We will question and challenge the national and international institutions who bear responsibility in the globalisation process, in particular those involved in finance, development and trade, calling on them to become more accountable to people and to develop policies that will lead toward a more equitable distribution of wealth.

We encourage ourselves and each other:

- to join together in ecumenical processes to more seriously committing ourselves, from out of our faith convictions, to work more vigorously for justice in the economy and on the earth,
- to struggle together for all to enjoy life in all its fullness,
- to analyse the destructiveness of the current economic system and to speak out against the injustices of economic globalisation,
- to search for alternatives by providing financial and spiritual support, and to support already existing and newly emerging economic and social alternatives like Oikocredit, the economy of communion of the Focolare movement, and fair trade,
- to join hands with civil and social movements to further our common struggle,
- to adopt self-restraint and simplicity in lifestyle, in resistance to the dominating cultural patterns of consumerism,
- to call for the establishment of a truth forum, as suggested by the Argentinian Federation of

Evangelical Churches,⁴ and subsequently

- to seek redress for injustices, such as illegitimate debts and unfair trade conditions.

In order jointly to walk towards an economy in the service of life we need to learn from each other and to remind each other of the one hope that unites us - that is Christ and his life-giving gospel. God calls us to give account of the hope that is in us. Brothers and sisters, call us to account if we violate that very hope - in our logic, in our spirit and in our praxis.

4 cf. footnote 2